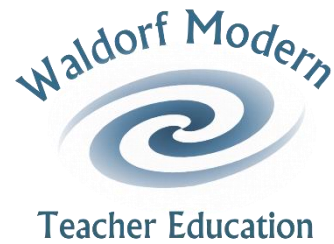


**A three- week project block
for middle school classes
on life and sex education**



**RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION IN THE
STEINER WALDORF CONTEXT:**

LIFE AND LOVE



SVEN SAAR

The educationalist Gert Biesta speaks of the fact that all pedagogy must pursue three goals: *socialization, qualification and individuation*¹: As a student, I want to learn at school how to better integrate myself into my social environment, acquire new knowledge and skills, and finally get to know myself.

For socially relevant and at the same time deeply personal areas such as love and sexuality, it is of particular importance to be able to explore issues of relationship, to obtain tools for careful and responsible conduct in this field, and to learn to trust my own instincts and intuitions.

As early as 2005 I considered designing a sex education epoch for my class, based on Rudolf Steiner's indication in the *First Teachers Course* to approach

¹ Gert Biesta, *The beautiful risk of Education*, Boulder 2014

the matter by “taking a wider view”² and to find one's way into the biology through the natural kingdoms. Of course, there is more to it than that:

- *The block must take place at the appropriate time of physical and emotional development.
- *It should be permeated throughout with a holistic mood that considers science, art, and reverence in equal measure, allowing for feelings of wonder, beauty, and positivity.
- *It must be contemporary, respectful, fearless, and body-positive: for all the embarrassment that must necessarily be acknowledged and overcome, no child should feel exposed or traumatized.
- *The teacher needs good subject knowledge, a lively sense of tact and humor, open-mindedness, and a keen awareness of the issues of the day.

This block does not absolve the parents from their responsibility to have “*the talk*”: an initial educational conversation in a manner appropriate to their beliefs. Parents have the right and the duty to do this as they see fit. The school’s remit follows this initial exposure, taking a wider, less personal and quite possibly more helpfully explicit route.

As a learning objective, students should feel empowered to engage in a sensitive exchange with themselves and (if they so choose) others about sexual and romantic issues without being transgressive.

After I developed and delivered this block for the first time, a detailed account of it (called “Life Cycles”) was printed in various English and German publications, including “Trailing Clouds of Glory,” the first major book on the subject in the English language³. Since then, society has seen many changes, and aspects of the project have changed accordingly. Its basic features, however, are archetypal in character and will therefore be presented here: not recommended for direct imitation but intended as

² Rudolf Steiner, First Teachers Course, Bangkok 2020, p. 284

³ Douglas Gerwin „Trailing Clouds of Glory”, Waldorf Publications, 2014

inspiration for curriculum creators. What is valid for twelve-year-olds in a certain city or country, must be grasped in a new and different way elsewhere.

In March 2022 I edited a book in German, published by the German Waldorf School federation⁴ that offers contemporary approaches to the subject, as presented by 12 authors. It includes chapters on sex education, gender identity, sexual orientation, gay teachers and pupils, perspectives on inclusion and medical aspects and is throughout informed by a social justice narrative. Translations into several languages are in discussion. This present article is taken from the book.

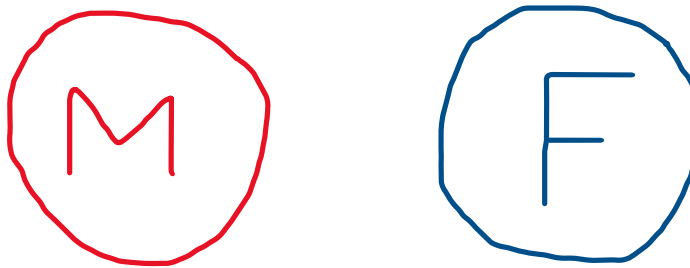


In my experience - I ran the *Life and Love* project as a classroom teacher in 2004, 2007, 2014, and 2018 - the best period is between December in sixth grade and December in seventh grade. During this developmental window, a kind of breathing space takes place in development: One is no longer a child, but not yet a teenager. The teacher must sense the students' "wakefulness" for romantic and sexual themes. It is crucial that they already

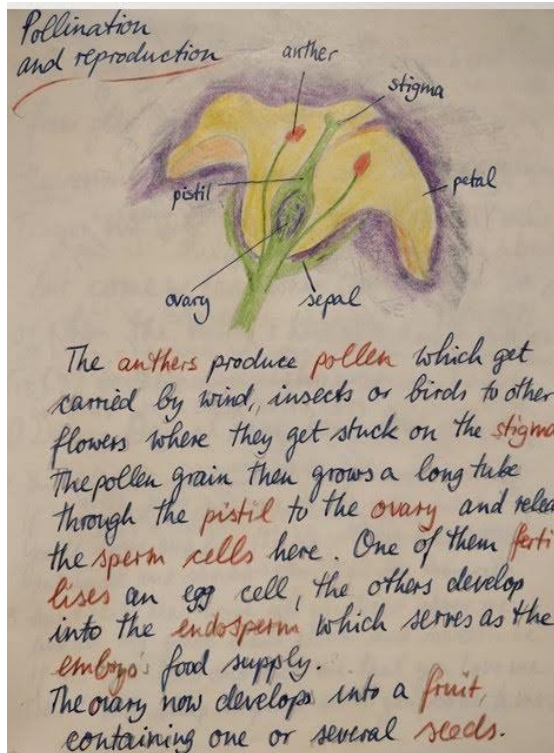
⁴ Sven Saar, "Beziehungskunst" Pädagogische Forschungsstelle am Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, Stuttgart 2022

show an interest but are not yet sexually active themselves. If possible, the first introduction to the topic should not yet address contraceptive and STD issues – space must be created for this in following years. Ideally, the block is *previewed at a parents' evening in fifth grade*: the concept is explained and the parents can ask questions of clarification. Following this, they have up to a year to have "the talk" with their children at a time that suits all involved.

In the classroom, work begins with a simple question: How would you depict the difference between man and woman in a diagram? Straight away, this opens a conversation: is there a clear line here? We will return to address questions of gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation; but at this early stage, we can already point out that the lines are not clear-cut. In any case, we can agree that this picture is inadequate:



Should the circles overlap, or complement each other as in yin and yang? Should there be more than two colors, and what would be the best shape? Immediately we enter a lively exchange, and a right or wrong view does not really exist. This experience sets the tone for what lies ahead.



We begin to explore the field of the masculine and feminine by means of the plant world: Here we already find "ovaries" and "sperm cells" and are welcome to giggle with embarrassment. Surprisingly soon we get used to the vocabulary: after all, they are only flowers!

In connection with pollination, we enter the realm of insects and briefly look at the wonderful metamorphosis of the butterfly.

From different worlds,
they resemble each other:
Nature created,
mysteriously,
The flower to be
like a butterfly caught;
And the butterfly formed
like a flower set free.

Sven Saar



From here we move on to the mayfly, which crawls on the river bottom for two years before its life changes decisively: It rises to the surface of the water, unfolds its new wings, flies around for a few hours, settles on a leaf, and begins to hatch out of its skin once more transformed.



All this happens for millions of mayflies on the same day. Towards evening, the second metamorphosis is complete: the insect now has neither mouth parts nor digestive organs: It is only concerned with mating. This takes place in the air, whereupon the tired female sinks to the water and lays her eggs before she drifts down the river, dying. The males die wherever they happen to be. In certain areas, bulldozers must move in over the next few days to remove the decaying carcasses.

Near Hastings, Minnesota, about 18 trillion animals rise from the Mississippi River each year - that would be 3000 for every human being on earth⁵! The leftovers are not considered waste everywhere: in some cultures, people immediately process the cleaned remains into protein-rich flour that can be added to many dishes.

Such a narrative stirs the pupils' imagination and leads to questions: what is the point of such a short life? The concept of the food chain is introduced and forms the bridge to the next animal: the salmon. The children experience its childhood and youth, for instance in the Scottish Highland

⁵ <https://freshwaterblog.net/2011/05/16/the-mayflys-lifecycle-a-fascinating-fleeting-story/>

brook, its travels downstream to the estuary, and the long journey to the hunting grounds southwest of Greenland., where it lives for a number of years.



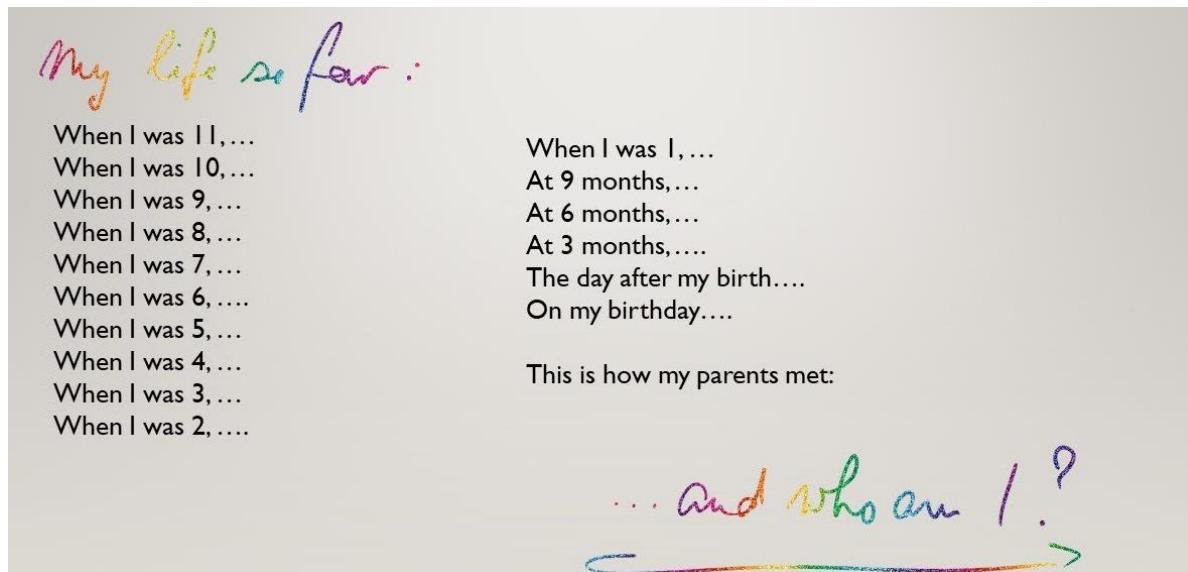
A most impressive aspect is the salmon's ability to find the way back to their birthplace: reproduction can only take place here! After crossing four thousand kilometers of Atlantic Ocean, the fish find the right river estuary and swim against the current, without rest or food. They often have to overcome shallows and even waterfalls, and it is here that hungry bears lie in wait for the exhausted salmon! After an excitingly narrated journey, the twelve-year-old child finds the idea that everything could be over just a few hundred meters before the destination almost unbearable: the animal kingdom is not merciful. Only humans can be humane!



Once the spawning has taken place, the parents die and the cycle of the life begins again. Now we begin to compare different kingdoms of nature, with questions about the relationship between parents and their descendants.

	Reproduction	Parent(s)	Relationship
Plants	Seeds fall near parent plant and/or are carried away by wind, water, or animals	Remain at site	none
Insects	M and F mate, eggs are laid	Move on or die	none
Fish and amphibians	F lays eggs, M fertilizes them	Moves on	none
Birds	Mating of M and F, nest-building	Stay and raise young until they are able to fly themselves, then usually separate. Some parents stay connected for life	Most parents release young and start a new breeding cycle
Mammals	Mating of M and F, live birth	Young are suckled and raised until sexual maturity. Then most young disperse, and parents remain or move on.	Lifetime relationship possible, but usually not in child-parent role.
Humans	Mating M and F, Children become part of a family which does not have to be with birth parents	Children are cared for and raised for about a quarter of their lives	Lifetime conscious relationship inevitable: No one forgets their parents or children if there was a relationship.

We have now reached the end of the first week. With the introduction of the human perspective it begins to get personal: the students are given the task of writing down one memorable event for each year of their lives. At first this is easy, but little by little the pictures fade and one has to ask the parents. This becomes the weekend homework, and interesting conversations ensue at the dinner table: What was it like when ...?



Family conversations about unusual or even problematic birth constellations can be opened in this way: was the child adopted? Did its same-sex parents decide on an alternative form of fertilization? Was there only a brief friendship between father and mother? The word "normal" should not be used at all in this context. The absolute priority is to convey to the child: *You were wanted and you are welcome here!*

At the beginning of the second week we cover the miracle of pregnancy and embryonic development: quite scientifically founded, but still with emphasis on the wonder of human life and human individuality. By describing the biological process of procreation, we can also address structure and function of the sexual organs, proceeding in a scientifically sober manner whenever possible. Then the class is asked, "Can you draw a penis?" The task leads to hilarity and breaks down thresholds: of course, this is easy! The next question can lead to consternation: "Can you draw a vulva?"

According to a 2013 British survey⁶, more than half of the women surveyed were unable to name the individual components of the vulva, or *their own* external sex organs: Mound of Venus, inner and outer labia, vaginal opening, urethra opening and clitoris. There are cultural reasons for this: Historically, girls and women have had to suffer much more than boys and

⁶ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/half-of-women-cannot-identify-vagina-eve-appeal-survey_uk_57c6e0f7e4b085cf1ecccea5

men from feelings of shame when it came to their sexual organs and their functions (“the naughty bits”). Today, we can contribute much to the development of a positive and relaxed body image if we calmly and objectively name everything that needs naming.

It may be necessary to emphasise that as teachers we never refer to the actual bodies of our students, or to ourselves, in covering this topic (or indeed at any other time): It goes without saying that we are all affected, so we don't have to expose anyone. Our relationship of trust also allows us to share an occasional quiet consensual smile, before moving on.

The topic of menstruation must be discussed with all students: one day, the boys in the class will have to accompany the girls and women in their lives with respect and understanding, and for this they need a positive image of the female bodily processes. In Central Europe, menstruating women are generally no longer officially considered "impure," but even here there are still remnants of exclusion and self-denial, often in their own souls. Modern teachers should see unflinching, body-positive education on this issue as their task, as it contributes decisively to the *socialization, qualification and individuation* of developing human beings.⁷ Pupils can then ask direct and individual questions of the biology teacher or school doctor in a follow-on session.

With boys, the issue of openness is somewhat more difficult, as their genital emanations are usually connected with feelings of pleasure. We are therefore moving into a more emotional, less objective and more emotionally intimate area than with menstruation. This should not prevent us from describing ejaculation and (male and female) masturbation in general as natural and healthy. It will not (yet) be necessary to go into detail about these processes .

By now, the children's minds will be buzzing with questions, most of which can't easily be asked in front of everyone. Now - in the middle of the second week - an important tool comes into play: *the question box*. In itself, this is not a novel idea, but it can be beneficial only if it is used systematically and responsibly:

⁷ There are many useful online tools and references on the subject: it is well worth reading widely before deciding which resources to share. Not everything needs to be dry and scientific: <https://pinklungi.com/is-menstruation-a-taboo-even-today/>



1. All students receive an identical looking sheet of paper.
2. They are asked to write down one or more questions, fold the paper and throw it through the slot into the box (even if they have not written anything). This is the only way to ensure absolute anonymity.
3. The teacher waits until the end of the day, empties the box, takes the pieces of paper and writes the questions in his/her own preparation notebook. Now they are no longer recognizable even by handwriting.
4. After careful consideration, the answers are given over the next few days at appropriate points in the lessons.

As teachers we handle this openly and tactfully, without prurience or euphemisms: pupils should be allowed to ask anything they want. By the way we approach this, we model to the children what it means to be an adult: I can deal with my emotional life confidently and am not trapped in my own shame.

Here are some of the questions I found in the box after the first day:

- Does Fuck mean Sex?
- Why is sperm white? And does it ever run out?
- If you have sex while you are pregnant, does it kill the baby?
- Why do people enjoy sex?
- Can human beings have sex with animals?
- How many babies can you have at a time?
- How do you kiss while having sex?
- Does the penis ever get stuck?
- Are breast implants unhealthy?
- What happens if someone eats sperm?
- Why do we cover up our sexual organs in public?
- Is this Main Lesson embarrassing for you (the teacher)?



One by one, we address all the questions, but not in the same way: "Why is sperm white?" or "Is sperm toxic?" can be answered briefly and factually.

"What are you allowed to do with a hooker?" or "Can women have sex with six men at the same time?" reveal influences of pornography and sexist thinking and need to be discussed contextually: What is important here is not just the actual answer, but the way in which we conduct the conversation.

The following process is a good example for the importance of a carefully planned process: I ask the class to pay close attention to their emotional response and read the box - question "Can people have sex with animals?" The students look shocked and react with voluble disgust. "The feelings you are experiencing now give an answer to the question. Sometimes you don't even need to ask others if something is okay, but learn to listen inwards. There is a voice that can tell us – we call it *intuition*. Especially when it comes to sexuality, where good advice is not often immediately available, it's important to get to know your inner voice and follow it."

Little by little we work our way through the subject matter, and with each uninhibited, tactful and sensitive response our trust in each other increases. After all this sex-talk it is high time to talk about the feeling that often gives rise to sexual feelings: *love*.

We learn a poem by William Blake (1757 - 1827):

The Clod & the Pebble

“Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell's despair.”

So sung a little clod of clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet;
But a pebble of the brook
Warbled out these meters meet:

“Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite.”



In working with this poem, we explore why love can make us both happy and unhappy. We draw a mind map with examples of "clay love" (parental love, self-sacrifice, gratitude) and "pebble love" (jealousy, possessiveness, fear of loss).

Now we have a useful metaphor to study human behavior. This is done with one of the most beautiful medieval love stories: *Tristan and Isolde* .

At this stage in their education, sixth graders are often used to a more factual narrative: how long might it be since they could last dream themselves into a really good story? For didactic reasons, it is advisable to invest a lot of preparation here: the deeper the "romantic immersion", the more effective the conversation about the issues will be the next day.

The story in a nutshell:

Tristan, a favored knight of the King of Cornwall, is wounded by a poisoned blade during a battle in Ireland. Fatefully and secretly, he is nursed back to health by the Irish princess Isolde, who is the only one with the powers to save his life. During his recovery, they fall in love - which, of course, must not be, for their kingdoms are enemies. After Tristan's return, King Mark in Cornwall tells him that he has found the solution for a lasting peace: he will

marry the Irish princess Isolde, and Tristan is to travel to Dublin to woo her on his behalf. Dutifully he does so and succeeds, and the young lovers humbly submit to the *raison d'état*, preparing for the sea voyage to Cornwall. Isolde's mother is worried, for she knows how things stand with the two of them: secretly she gives Isolde's maid a wine spiked with love potion to pour for the royal couple at their wedding, so that Isolde can forget Tristan and will only have eyes for her husband. The maid hides the bottle in Isolde's ship's cabin.

Tristan and Isolde spend their crossing chastely playing chess, remaining true to their resolution to be no more than friends and to ignore their romantic feelings. On the last day before their arrival, Isolde suggests that, to celebrate their proven strength of will, they drink together from an especially fine wine that her mother has secretly given to the maid. (The more wakeful children in the audience react here with "Oh no!" ...)



After the drink takes effect, the couple's fate is sealed: Neither will ever be able to love anyone else. Nevertheless, they know that out of fealty they must remain true to their promises, and the wedding takes place as planned. Although Tristan tries to avoid Isolde as much as possible, the temptation is

too strong: they begin to meet secretly and are soon discovered. King Mark, betrayed and deeply hurt, would have them both executed, were it not for the maid, who at the last minute brings up the love potion as a mitigating circumstance. The king decides to forgive his wife and banishes Tristan from the country. The latter travels across the English Channel to Brittany, where he makes a name for himself as a glorious knight. He tries to forget his beloved by marrying a new woman - also named Isolde, of all things! Already on the wedding night it is clear that they can never become lovers, and understandably his bride is deeply disappointed. Soon it happens that Tristan is wounded once more in battle, again by a poisonous blade. Despite all bitterness, his wife loves him, and sends for the only person who can save her husband's life: Isolde, the Queen of Cornwall.

Of course, she knows about Tristan's feelings. Her husband lies dying, and only the hope of seeing his beloved Isolde again keeps him fighting to stay alive. His wife has discussed with the captain of the ship going to Cornwall that he will hoist white sails if Isolde is allowed to come to Brittany; black sails will mean that King Mark has forbidden her to travel. For days she stands impatiently at the window and finally sees the ship approaching the harbor - with white sails. At that moment, seeing the longing expression on her husband's face, her jealousy wins out and she declares that the sails are black. Tristan sinks back and gives up fighting for his life. Within a few minutes he is dead. Meanwhile, his beloved Isolde rushes up the steps of the castle but arrives just too late. Full of pain, she sinks onto his deathbed and breathes her last. Shocked, Tristan's wife looks at the dead couple and regrets too late that she gave in to her dark feelings. Full of remorse, she orders their remains to be sent by ship to Cornwall. King Mark receives the bodies with honor and, touched by the inevitability of their fate, gives them a common grave. On this grow a hazel and a honeysuckle, which in the course of years intertwine, and whose descendants still blossom every year throughout Cornwall .



It is advisable not to let anything directly follow this narrative: It works best directly before break time or in the last lesson of the day, where the pupils are immediately busy with other issues. Then the images can sink untouched into the soul and work in the unconscious. When we recall the story on the next day, the emotional reactions will be in the foreground at first and will quickly develop into questions about fate, fairness, loyalty and jealousy in conversation. The class are now given a questionnaire :

Incident	Clay love	Pebble love
Isolde nurses her country's enemy.		
Tristan goes on a courtship for his king.		
Tristan and Isolde agree to ignore their feelings.		
They accept that Isolde must marry King Mark.		
After Isolde's wedding, they begin to meet secretly.		
King Mark is jealous.		
He forgives them both for their deception.		
The new Isolde suffers from her unrequited love.		
She sends messengers to Cornwall to save her husband.		
King Mark allows Isolde to travel to Brittany.		
Tristan's wife lies about the color of the sails.		
Isolde dies of a broken heart.		
King Mark has them both buried together.		

Working in groups, the students begin to divide the events of the narrative into "clay love" and "pebble love" and have valuable exchanges along the way: they have been given a tool for emotional literacy. In years to come, when their own feelings might occasionally threaten to overwhelm them, it may help them to know that all love takes place between these poles. In this way, teachers can contribute in an age-appropriate way and in harmony with the curriculum (Middle Ages!) to the realization of goals such as *socialization, qualification and individuation* for each child.

We are dealing here, of course, with very clear polarities: Man - woman, love - duty, possessiveness - selflessness, jealousy - healing. Through the curriculum, the students discover that life is multifaceted: hardly any moral situation is unambiguous. This could be a good starting point for

conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation... certainly it is not the only one. The teacher's task is to support adolescents in their search for orientation and self-discovery. As always in education, we open doors to reveal attractive vistas - whether the students walk through them must be their choice.

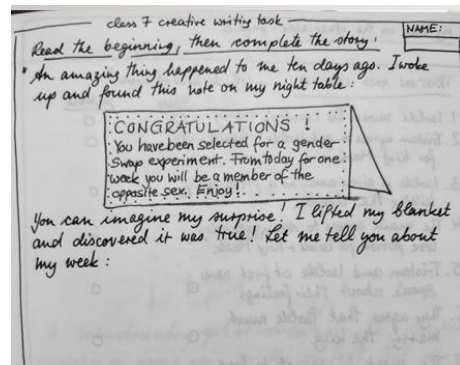
In 2018, I gave my class 7 the following essay topic:

An amazing thing happened to me ten days ago:
I woke up to find this note on my nightstand:

Congratulations!

You have been selected for a gender swap experiment! From today for one week, you will be a member of the opposite sex! Enjoy!

You can imagine my surprise! I lifted my blanket and discovered it was true!!! Let me tell you about my week...



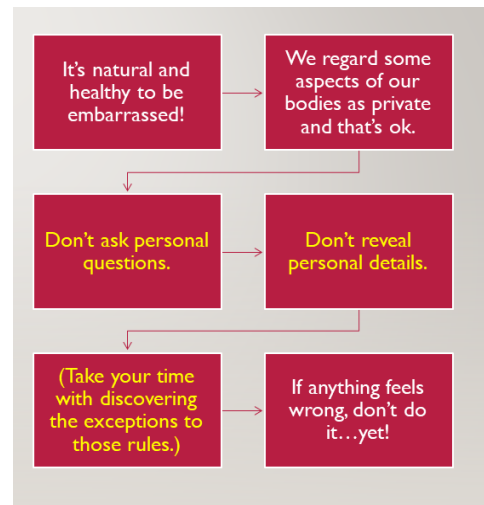
While the students wrote with rare focus and intensity and enjoyed the presentation of the results the next day, from today's point of view – not even five years have passed - the assignment seems to me *too binary*: it reduces the imaginary transformation to only one option: from boy to girl or vice versa. This task reflects my perception of a contemporary issue at the time; in 2023 I would need to approach it differently. The fast-changing social values in this field demand our awareness that images and assignments only have temporary validity. If you read this article in 2030, you will need to reassess which aspects still ring true. This should not paralyze us, but rather educate us towards modesty: After all, it is not our future that is at stake here, but that of the students who experience the freedom of an ocean where past generations moved in rivers and canals, defined by narrow banks. Navigating an ocean requires more sophisticated tools, and providing these is part of our mission.

The final days of the block are devoted to current issues: in 2004, we discussed the "Wonderbra" and the pressure of advertising on women to literally promote their breasts. In doing so, we examined fashion from previous centuries, recognising how it often reduced the perception of women to their secondary sexual characteristics. It was encouraging for girls to hear from their classmates that they expected more in their future partners than an attractive appearance. More recently, the topic of body hair came up, and we looked at the meaning and function of it, as well as commercially and artificially generated expectations. It's also worth calculating the body mass index of a Barbie doll, leading to conversations about what constitutes "a good figure" and a healthy body.



We conclude by beginning a conversation about the issues of respect, consent, abuse, over-conceptualization, privacy, and contraception. This will of course continue in future years and form a key aspect of the *Personal, Social, Health and Economics Curriculum (PSHE)* – in other words, *Life Skills*. Through the intensive, detailed and relatable manner of our approach to this subject, we have created an atmosphere in which exchanges about love and partnership will become easier. We have broken down thresholds and provided personal and emotional tools.

The concept of *Safeguarding* needs to be mentioned here as well: in growing up, the human being gradually assumes more and more responsibility for keeping themselves safe and well, and for defining their boundaries. At the end of the block a conversation about self-acceptance and empowerment is well placed.



Looking back on the project, almost all students are rather glad that the next block will cover math or geography – this topic has asked a lot of them! But they also clearly express their gratitude for the impulses they received, and for answering questions they could never have asked of parents or peers. Hopefully, they have gained in self-confidence, empathy and social skills and now stand a little more securely at the helm of their vessel.

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